

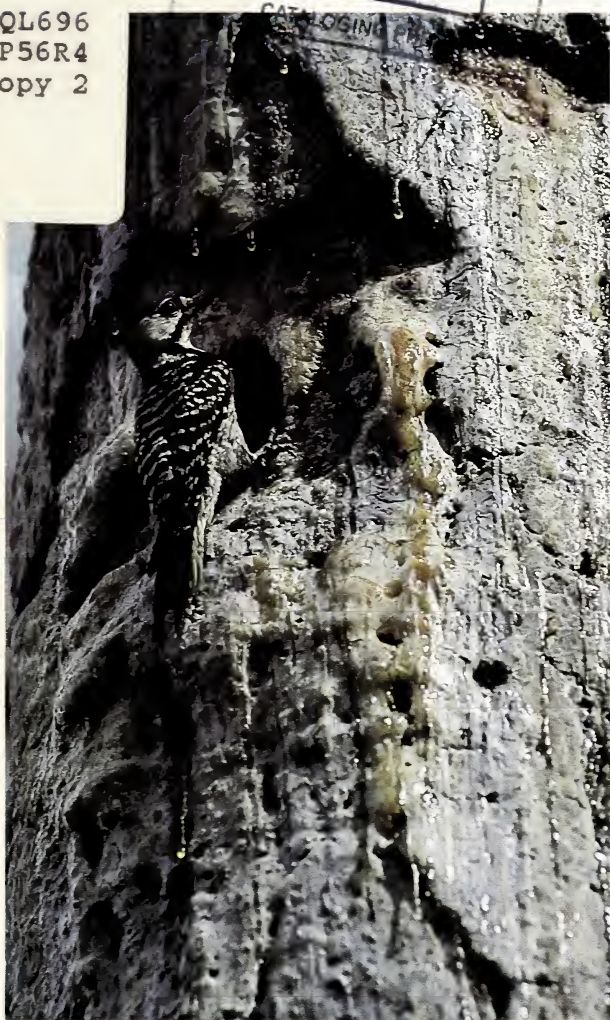
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# RED-COCKADED WOODPECKERS of the ~~Apalachicola~~ National Forest

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United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest Service  
Southern Region

# **RED-COCKADED WOODPECKERS of the Apalachicola National Forest**

The red-cockaded woodpecker was once a common bird in the mature pine forests of the southeast. Primarily due to habitat loss, the species is now endangered. The Apalachicola National Forest contains the largest known population of red-cockaded woodpeckers, with over 600 colonies documented.

Many forest visitors want to see the red-cockaded woodpeckers in the Apalachicola. To find a colony site, or observe the bird's habitat and possibly see a red-cockaded and its associated species, refer to the map on the back of this brochure.

Once a colony site is located, look for the marked trees. Individual cavity trees are painted with two yellow bands. The best time to catch a glimpse of the red-cockaded within its colony is early morning or late afternoon. Throughout the rest of the day it is also possible to see the bird foraging in or around the colony site.

## **Description**

The red-cockaded woodpecker is slightly larger than a bluebird. The back and top of the head are black. Numerous, small white spots, arranged



in horizontal rows on the back, give a ladder-back appearance. The cheek is white. Males and females look almost alike, except males have a small red streak above the cheek. The red streak is rarely seen and then only with field glasses in bright sunlight. Juvenile males have a small red patch on the very top of the head until fall.

## **Social Organization**

Among woodpeckers, the red-cockaded has an advanced social system. These birds live in a group called a clan. The clan may have from two to nine birds, but there is never more than one breeding pair. Young birds frequently stay with their parents for several months. The other adults are usually males called helpers.

## **The Colony**

A clan nests and roosts in a group of cavity trees called a colony. The colony may have from one or two cavity trees to more than 12, but the trees are used only by one clan. Cavities are made in live pines. Typically, within any colony, some cavities are finished and in use, some are still under construction, and some have been abandoned.

Only the red-cockaded typically makes cavities in live pines, but 11 other birds, 5 mammals, 2 reptiles, and bees are known to use the cavities. Some of these animals compete vigorously with the red-cockaded for its cavity. Some of the major competitors are the bluebird, red-bellied woodpecker, red-headed woodpecker, pileated woodpecker, and flying squirrel.

## **Nesting Behavior**

The red-cockaded woodpecker nests between late April and July. The female usually lays two to four eggs in the breeding male's roost cavity. Clan members take turns incubating the eggs during the day, but the breeding male stays with the eggs at night. The eggs hatch in 10 to 12 days.



## Feeding Behavior

The clan spends much of its time looking for food as it travels about its territory. Most of the searching is concentrated on the trunks and limbs of live pine trees. There, the birds scale the bark and eat the eggs and larvae of various insects.



## Cavity Construction

The red-cockaded woodpecker is the only bird that makes nesting and roosting cavities in live southern pines. The red-cockaded takes months and even years to excavate a cavity.

The most intensive work on cavities occurs in summer, after the young leave the nest. Most of this work is done in the morning.

## Cavity Maintenance

Scattered about the trunk near the cavity entrance, numerous small holes called resin wells are chipped through the bark. Resin flow from these holes eventually coats the trunk with pitch. From a distance the cavity tree looks like a candle.

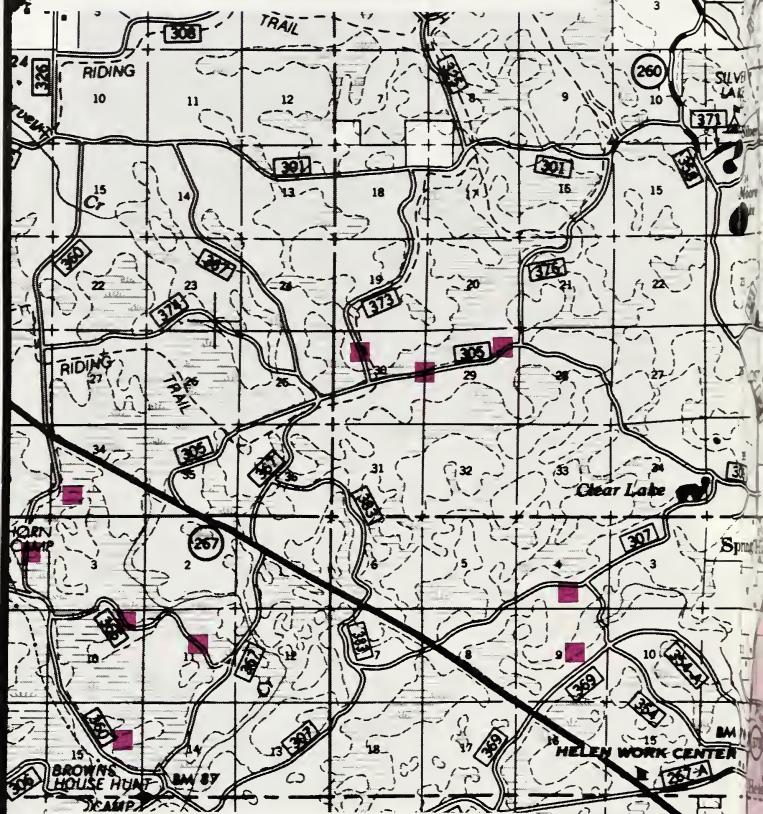


## Habitat Requirements

Cavities are rarely found in trees as young as 30 to 40 years old, and most cavity trees are twice that old. The average age of cavity trees on the Apalachicola ranges from 90 to 100 years old.

The colony site, or stand of trees containing and surrounding the cavity trees, is typically a mature, park-like, pine stand. Frequent burning maintains the suitability of the pine stand.

Adequate foraging habitat is vital to the red-cockaded woodpecker. Good foraging habitat consists of pine stands with trees 9 inches and larger in diameter. The acreage of foraging habitat needed by a clan varies with the quality of the habitat. One hundred acres of pine is sufficient for some clans. However, in some areas, habitat conditions are not ideal or competition from other colonies is low. Clans in such areas commonly forage over several hundred acres.



## Legend

- Red-cockaded Woodpecker colonies
- Gopher tortoise habitat







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## Associated Species

Numerous plant and animal species are associated with the red-cockaded woodpecker's habitat. One, the gopher tortoise, is particularly interesting. The gopher tortoise, like the red-cockaded woodpecker, has declined in numbers over most of its range. However, as with the woodpecker, gopher tortoise populations are high on the Apalachicola.

As you walk through the red-cockaded's habitat, be on the lookout for the gopher tortoise's conspicuous burrow in the sandy soil. The burrows are more commonly found on the drier sites associated with longleaf pine, wiregrass, and turkey oak. You might even get lucky and see a tortoise foraging outside its burrow.

The gopher tortoise burrows are used by many species other than the tortoise. Some of these species are temporary visitors such as the eastern diamondback rattlesnake and the threatened indigo snake. Some species, such as the gopher frog, depend on the burrows for permanent habitat.

## Suggestions

Although the red-cockaded woodpecker is not particularly shy, please use caution when observing the bird, especially during nesting season. Also, please do not harass gopher tortoises or disturb their burrows.

Enjoy your visit to the Apalachicola National Forest. If you need further information contact one of the Forest Service offices in Bristol or Tallahassee.

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